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ON WRITING FOR THE FILMS

BY W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

I KNOW very well that it is unbecoming in me to express my opinion on the subject of writing for the screen, since I have busied myself with the matter only for a few weeks. But in these weeks I have learned a good deal and I pretend only to jot down my first impressions. Everyone now allows that the pictures have reached a stage where they can no longer be treated with a contemptuous shrug of the shoulders. If you are of a pedagogic turn of mind,—as apparently many authors are in these days,—and wish to improve your fellow men, there is no medium which gives you a greater opportunity. You read your newspaper cursorily and what goes in at one eye goes out of the other. But what you see at the pictures impresses you with peculiar force. It may be deplored that the novelist and the playwright should think it their business to preach; but apparently they often do, too often, perhaps; and they are fortunate enough to find many people who are willing to take them with the utmost seriousness. They can certainly expound their views of life more effectively on the screen than between the covers of a book or even within the three hours' traffic of the stage. The screen is an unrivalled method of propaganda. This was widely realized during the war, but the means employed were ingenuous and sometimes defeated their own object. Little allowance was made for the frailty of human nature, and the pill of useful information was so little coated with sugar that the wretched public refused to swallow it. I shall not forget seeing a picture in a remote province of China which showed the President of the French Republic shaking hands with the Minister of Public Works. This was designed to impress the wily Oriental with the greatness of France, but I do not believe it achieved its object. If on the other hand a writer aspires to be no more, and no less, than an

artist, the film is not unworthy of his consideration. There is no reason why the picture should not be a work of art.

But on this question the attitude of many of those who are concerned with the production of pictures is somewhat depressing. For if you wander about the studios you will find that some of the more intelligent men you meet are frankly pessimistic. They will tell you that the whole business is no more than a trick. They deny that there can be any art in a production that is dependant on a machine. It is true that for the most part the attempts that are made at an artistic result support this argument. There are directors who desire to be artistic. It is pathetic to compare the seriousness of their aim with the absurdity of their achievement. Unfortunately you cannot be artistic by wanting to be so; but the lamentable results of these endeavors, often so strenuous and so well-meaning, must be ascribed rather to incapacity in those who make them than to unsuitability in the material. You will not achieve art in a picture by composing pompous titles or by bolstering up a sordid story with the introduction of a Russian ballet or a fairy tale. The irrelevant is never artistic. The greatest pest of the moment is the symbol. I do not know how it was introduced into the pictures but I judge that it was introduced successfully; the result is that now symbolism is dragged in by the hair. Nothing, of course, can be more telling, nothing has greater possibilities; but it must be used with tact, appositeness, and moderation. To my mind there is something grotesque in the way in which an obvious symbol gambols, like a young elephant, through the middle of a perfectly commonplace story. No, the gentlemen who direct pictures will not make them works of art in this fashion. I think they would be well advised to set about the matter more modestly. There is a good deal of spade work to be done first. The sets might occupy their attention. They have yet to discover the aesthetic value of simplicity. They will learn in due course that the eye is wearied by a multiplicity of objects. They will not crowd their rooms with furniture and knick-knacks. They will realize the beauty of an empty wall.

Then I think they can profitably occupy themselves with the subject of line. It is distressing to see, judging by the results,

how little thought is given to the beauty that may be obtained from graceful attitudes and harmonious grouping. The lover can clasp his beloved to his heart in such a manner as to make an exquisite pattern; but unless he is a very fortunate young man, whom the gods especially favor, he will not do this by the light of nature. I have been amazed to see how often the lovely heroine has been allowed to be photographed in a position that makes her look like a sack of potatoes. I venture to think also that those directors who pursue beauty (I have nothing to say about those who merely want to produce a picture that will bring in a million dollars: I have no doubt they know their business much better than I do) might explore more systematically the photographic possibilities of atmospheric effect. The camera is capable of a great deal in this direction, and the delight of every audience at the most modest attempts in this field, such as scenes by moonlight, show that the public would not be unresponsive. There is immense scope for the director who wishes to make beautiful pictures; but the Reinhardt of the screen has not yet arrived.

It will appear from these observations that I think the director should be definitely an interpreter of the author. Since I am a writer it is perhaps natural that I should have little patience with his claim to be a creative artist. I think he has assumed this impressive rôle because in the past he has too often been asked to deal with material which was totally unsuited to the screen. He could produce a tolerable picture only by taking the greatest liberties with the story he was given, and so he got into the habit of looking upon the story as a peg upon which to hang his own inventions. He had no exalted idea of the capacity of his audience (the commonest phrase upon his lips was: Remember that my public doesn't consist of educated people. It is not a two dollar public it is a ten and fifteen cent public); and—if I may say so without offense—he was no genius. The stories he offered to an eager world were inane. For the most part the motive was absurd, the action improbable, the characterization idiotic; and yet so novel was the appeal, so eager the desire for this new amusement, that the public accepted all these defects with a tolerant shrug of the shoulders. The mistake the director

made was in supposing the public did not see that they were defects. The most successful showmen have always credited the public with shrewdness. Now that the novelty of the pictures has worn off, the public is no longer willing to take these defects so humorously. They find them inconvenient. It seems to me that a few years ago I did not see bored people in a cinema: now I see them all around me. They raise their voices in derision. It is refreshing to hear the burst of laughter which greets a pretentious title.

The picture companies are discovering, what the theatrical managers might have told them long since, that no matter how eminent your stars and how magnificent your production, if your story is bad the public will not bother with you. The picture companies have put a bold face on the matter. They have swallowed their medicine with fortitude. They have gone to the highways and hedges and constrained the author to come in. They have brushed aside his pleas that he had no wedding garment: the feast was set.

The story is now all the thing.

It remains to be seen how the author will meet the situation. I do not think it will be surprising if he does not create very great works of art, for they come as the gods will, sparingly, and should be accepted with surprise and gratitude, but not demanded as a right. It is very good to receive a barrel of caviare now and then, but for the daily meal one should be satisfied with beef or mutton. At all events there will be no excuse for the author if his stories are not coherent and probable, if his psychology (to use the somewhat pompous term by which the play of motive is known in the world of pictures) is not reasonable, and his characters and the incidents he chooses to illustrate them not true to life.

In the past probably the worst pictures have been those which were made out of plays. Because there are certain similarities between moving pictures and plays it was thought that a successful play would make a good picture and, what is more eccentric, that an unsuccessful play might do the same. The fact that a play had been acted in London or New York was supposed to be a valuable asset, and for all I know this may be a fact. But it was

constantly found either that the play offered insufficient material, or material of a character that was useless on the screen. We have all seen pictures purporting to be versions of well-known plays and found the most outrageous travesties. And what is more, they were dull. The fact suggests itself that the play as a play is seldom suited for the screen. When you write a play you take an idea from a certain angle. You quickly learn how much you have to eliminate, how ruthlessly you must compress, and how rigidly you must stick to your point. But when the result of these efforts comes to the screen only a bare skeleton remains. The director is not to be so bitterly blamed when he claims that he has had to invent a story to clothe these naked bones. The technique of the modern stage is very sharply defined, and to my mind the modern play as it stands has very little to give the pictures. The moving picture much more suggests the plays of the Elizabethans. But of course an idea can be looked at in all sorts of ways and there is no reason why a story which has proved effective on the stage should not prove equally effective on the screen. It must be written entirely anew from that standpoint. I think a writer might make a good picture from a theme upon which he has already written a good play, but he will probably need incidents other than those which he has used in the play, and, it may be, different characters. He is absurd if he expects real invention to be done by the scenario writer to whom the management who has bought his play will entrust the work of arranging it for the screen. That is work that he alone can do. No one can know his idea as well as he, and no one can be so intimately acquainted with his characters.

I think there is more to be said for the screen version of novels, since here the case is reversed and it is not a matter of expansion and elaboration but of selection. I do not see why very good pictures should not be made from novels. They will serve as illustrations for those who have read them, and may induce those who have not to do so. This may be a good enough thing. It depends on the novel. For myself I look forward to the time when, the present dislike of costume having been overcome, all the great novels of our literature are shown on the screen. I hope, however, that the scenarios which must be prepared for

this purpose will be devised by a writer who is not only acquainted with the technique of the film but is also a man of letters and of taste.

But in my opinion all this in relation to the screen is by the way. I venture to insist that the technique of writing for the pictures is not that of writing for the stage nor that of writing a novel. It is something betwixt and between. It has not quite the freedom of the novel, but it certainly has not the fetters of the stage. It is a technique of its own, with its own conventions, its own limitations, and its own effects. For that reason I believe that in the long run it will be found futile to adapt stories for the screen from novels or from plays—we all know how difficult it is to make even a passable play out of a good novel—and that any advance in this form of entertainment which may eventually lead to something artistic, lies in the story written directly for projection on the white sheet.

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